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ABSTRACT

The basic communication skills of prospective teachers at the University of Georgia were assessed with knowledge and performance instruments. The knowledge instrument was a criterion referenced test in communicative arts (logical reasoning, library research, composition, language, communications media and careers, literature, reading, and oral communication). The performance measures included teaching plans and materials, classroom procedures, and interpersonal skills. Other data, such as the National Teacher Examination (NTE) scores and ratings by cooperating teachers or university supervisors, were also collected. The data show the general estimates of the interns' ability to write but not of their ability to teach writing. These correlations also show that commonly used objective measures like the NTE or criterion referenced tests follow the same pattern. In comparing these results with assessment results from two other states, four conclusions can be drawn: (1) teacher candidates are being checked for basic skills, (2) the primary mode for checking their writing is a direct measure of writing, (3) most English teacher candidates pass these writing tests, and (4) assessments of the writing skill of prospective teachers might identify their writing ability, but not their ability to teach writing. (HOD)

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Assessing the Writing Skill of Prospective English Teachers

Ramon Veal and Gale Hulme

Our interest in the basic communication skills of prospective teachers stems from our involvement in the development and use of two assessment instruments in Georgia. One comes from a set of knowledge instruments that includes more than twenty teaching fields. It is a criterion referenced test in Communicative Arts (CRT-CA) covering eight areas: logical reasoning, library research, composition, language, communications media and careers, literature, reading, and oral communications. Passing this test is required for first time certification in English.

The second Georgia assessment instrument is actually a collection of three performance instruments -- Teaching Plans and Materials, Classroom Procedures, and Interpersonal Skills. The instruments are, in fact, rating forms for forty-five teaching behaviors (indicators) grouped under fourteen teacher competencies such as "uses a variety of teaching methods" and "manages classroom interactions." Together they are called the Teacher Performance Assessment Instruments (TPAI).

Both the knowledge and the performance instruments were used with UGA English interns for the 1979-80 school year. We also collected other data such as National Teacher Examinations (NTE) scores and teacher or university supervisor ratings. From all these data sources, we've collected all scores that relate to UGA prospective English teachers' knowledge of composition as well as to their skill in writing.[1*] Relationships among these data are summarized below. They are then compared with other assessment results from Pennsylvania and South Carolina.

In selecting data from the study described above, we chose to use as criterion measures two supervisor ratings--one of the prospective teachers'

*Unless otherwise noted, all background information in this report comes from this UGA source.

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writing skill and one of their ability to teach writing. We made this choice principally because, in the previously cited study, supervisor ratings correlated more than any other predictor with successful teaching performance as indicated by the TPAI.

The correlations reported in Table 1 are between four measures related to writing and the two criteria (supervisor ratings) already mentioned. The first writing measure, the NTE English Expression test, is only one part of the general or common examination. It is a multiple choice test of English usage and effectiveness of expression. The .51 correlation indicates at least a moderate association between this subtest of the NTE and the university superivsors' estimate of the interns' writing skill. The .32 correlation for the same NTE subtest and the supervisors' estimate of the interns' ability to teach writing implies a positive but not strong association for the two variables. If the judgment of the university supervisor (field center director) is taken as a criterion for the prospective English teachers' writing ability or ability to teach writing, then the "English Expression" score from the NTE is a relatively weak predictor and certainly not a substitute for the supervisor's judgment.

Much of the same story applies to the second variable listed in Table 1, the NTE "English" option or area test score. Correlations of .51 and .40 parallel the .51 and .32 for the NTE English expression score--a minor prediction but no substitute.

According to the Georgia Department of Education (DOE) the "composition" section of the Georgia CRT in communicative arts is only a test of knowledge about composition and the teaching of composition, not an estimate of the ability to teach writing. In a sense, then, the correlations in Table 1 confirm this DOE contention. The coefficients, .58 between the CRT composition section and the supervisor's rating of writing ability and .09 between the CRT composition section and the supervisor's rating of the ability to teach writing, suggest

TABLE 1

Correlations Among 1979-80 UGA Interns' Writing Scores

(N=30)

Related Measures	Writing	Teaching Writing
NTE Eng. Expression	.51*	.32*
NTE Eng. Option	.51*	.40*
CRT Composition	.58*	.09
General Teaching Ability	.63*	.49*

TABLE 2

Correlations Among 1980-81 UGA Interns' Writing Scores

(N=10)

Related Measures	Writing	Teaching Writing
CRT Composition	.12	.06
Writing Sample (Analytic)	.76*	.27
Writing Sample (Primary trait)	.82*	.26
General Teaching Ability	.85*	.55

TABLE 3

USC Screening Test Results

				Remediation	
	Candidates	Pass	Fail	Pass	Fail
Number	329	236	93	67	23
(Percentage)		(72)	(28)	(72)	(28)

*Significant, at least, at the 05 level.

a distinct difference between the two abilities. Further, the predictive power of the composition section parallels that of the entire CRT, with at least moderate associations existing between it and other knowledge tests like the NTE (or grades) but virtually none between it and the effective teaching behaviors identified by the TPAI.

Each of the three objective tests identified so far are limited in their ability to predict supervisors' ratings of writing ability and teaching ability. The two parts of the NTE show minimum associations, .32 and .40, and the Georgia CRT composition score shows essentially no correlation at all (.09). The fourth measure checked. The supervisor's overall rating, offers the strongest predictive power, .63 with writing ability and .49 with the ability to teach writing. Perhaps this association results from some sort of "halo" effect; that is the supervisor's general estimate of the intern's abilities influences his/her estimate of particular abilities like writing or the teaching of writing. On the other hand, the influence may be in the reverse direction, from writing abilities to general abilities.

If, then, the correlated supervisors' ratings are all suspect and the objective measures are weak in prediction, what about another possibility, rated writing samples. This past fall, a relatively small population (10 interns) was asked to provide one descriptive paper, a short assignment to compare two schools visited for observations, as a sample of their ability to write. We then compared modified analytic and primary trait ratings (two raters achieved 90% agreement within one score point) with supervisors' ratings of writing ability and the ability to teach writing. We also checked the level of correlation between the interns' scores on the CRT composition test and their ratings by supervisors. The correlations listed in Table 2 reveal the results of these comparisons.

Both of the writing sample ratings, analytic and primary trait, are significantly correlated (.76 and .82) with supervisors' ratings of the interns'

ability to write and their ability to teach writing. Also, supervisors' ratings of general ability to teach are similarly correlated at .85. On the other hand, these same predictors (rated writing samples and ratings of general teaching ability) do not significantly correlate with estimates of the ability to teach writing. Nor, for this small sample, do CRT composition scores correlate with estimates of the abilities to write or to teach writing.

In summary, general estimates of teaching ability and rated writing samples converge to predict (.63, .76, and .82) supervisors' estimates of the interns' ability to write but not of their ability to teach writing. In short, supervisors can more easily identify good writers than they can pinpoint good teachers of writing. These correlations also show, at least for Georgia, that commonly used objective measures like the NTE or the CRT follow the same pattern; such measures pick out good writers better than they identify good teachers of writing.

As part of its developing program in secondary education in 1980, Penn State used a modified holistic rating system to assess the writing skill of all its prospective teachers in five subject areas: English, mathematics, science, social studies, and foreign language. English, science, and foreign language teacher candidates scored equally well and a little higher than the social studies and mathematics teachers[2]. As yet, no pass-fail rates have been reported, but results confirm that not all prospective teachers are alike in their writing ability.

Much the same story is reported for the University of Pittsburgh, except that the English teacher candidates scored slightly higher than all the others on the College English Placement Test.[3]

A 1979 teacher education and certification law in South Carolina requires training institutions to screen teacher education applicants in the basic skill areas of reading, mathematics, and writing. During the 1978-79 year, the University of South Carolina (USC) initiated screening tests and remedial instruction in these three areas. The numbers in Table 3 reveal the experience USC

had. Initially, 72% passed; then, with remediation, 72% of the first failures passed on the second or third trials. Therefore, in the end 92% passed. The criterion USC used was the mean of seventeen year-olds in the sample of the National Assessment of Educational Progress.[4]

The writing test, composed of several different assignments, included a persuasive, an explanatory, and a descriptive task. The written papers, letters, etc. were rated holistically, analytically, and according to primary traits. Of the 28% who did not meet the mean seventeen year-old cutoff score, 18% came in the area of writing. Only 2% failed to make the cutoff score in reading.

For those who did fail, counseling and remedial assistance were available in the College of Education and, for writing, there was also a writing laboratory in the University English department. The remediation program has been relatively successful, particularly for helping minority candidates overcome the difficulties sometimes encountered with objective, standardized tests. In the original testing about two-thirds of the white students and one-third of the black students passed; and then, on the retest, 74% of the white students passed and 55% of the black students passed.

Several conclusions that can be drawn from the experience of these four state universities are, first, that teacher candidates are certainly being checked for basic skills and, second, that the primary mode for checking on writing is a direct measure of writing. A third conclusion is that most, but not all, English teacher candidates pass these writing tests. And, finally, assessments of the writing skill of prospective teachers might identify their writing ability but not their ability to teach writing.

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